



September 24, 2018

The Honorable Hank Vapuel  
PO Box 30014  
Lansing, MI 48909-7514

Dear Chairman Vapuel:

I am writing today in support of Senate Bill 541. This legislation will help to address the persistent issue of barriers in access to oral health care for Michigan's most vulnerable populations.

The Michigan Primary Care Association (MPCA) is the voice of community health centers that provide primary and preventive health care to more than 700,000 patients in more than 300 rural and urban communities across Michigan. Throughout its nearly 40-year history, MPCA has been a fierce advocate for quality, integrated care for everyone, breaking down barriers in access to health care services, whether they are physical, behavioral, or oral health related.

MPCA's members provide care to everyone, regardless of whether they have insurance, and must be located in and serve residents of federally designated Medically-Underserved Areas and Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSAs). Without community health centers, many would be forced to look outside their communities for health care or would have no access to care at all. This is especially true when it comes to dental care. Seventy-seven of Michigan's 83 counties – urban and rural alike – have some form of a dental HPSA.

In 2017, MPCA's members provided more than a half million appointments for dental services to more than 217,000 Michigan residents – a 25 percent increase since 2013. Despite this robust safety net of dental professionals, the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services reports that only 27 percent of Michigan adults over the age of 21 on Medicaid had a dental visit in 2015. The data is unequivocal – Michigan faces a shortage of dentists who will see the state's most vulnerable patients, and the demand for dental services far exceeds the supply of practitioners willing to treat them.

Michigan health centers gladly provide dental care to more and more people each year, but it is an ongoing challenge to recruit the dentists needed to meet the oral health care demands of their communities. Senate Bill 541 will increase the pool of providers able to complete many of the routine preventive and restorative procedures our members' patients require, which will help alleviate recruitment issues and address the gaps in access to dental care in underserved populations.

In an environment of health care reform, where we are looking for more effective ways to limit costs and increase the quality of services, we need to consider evidenced-based models of care that accomplish these objectives. Michigan should move to accept dental therapists as part of the dental care team to ensure more people have access to quality dental care.

Sincerely,

Loretta V. Bush, MSHA  
Chief Executive Officer

**House Committee on Health Policy, 2018**  
**Loretta V. Bush, Chief Executive Officer, MPCA**  
**Testimony Supporting SB 541 – Dental Therapist Licensure**

Good afternoon, Chairman Vaupel and members of the committee.

My name is Loretta Bush, and I am here today as Chief Executive Officer of the Michigan Primary Care Association (MPCA) to speak in support of Senate Bill 541.

As many of you know, the Michigan Primary Care Association is the voice of community health centers that provide primary and preventive health care to more than 700,000 patients in more than 300 rural and urban communities across Michigan.

Our members provide comprehensive care, including medical, dental, mental health, substance use, pharmacy, and other enabling services all under one roof. Last year Michigan health centers collectively provided more than half a million dental visits to more than 200,000 residents.

Health centers care for everyone, regardless of whether or not they have insurance, and for many communities, are the only place where people can access care.

And that access is why I'm here today. Health centers must be located in federally designated medically-underserved areas or Health Professional Shortage areas (HPSAs). They're already serving areas of need. And when it comes to access to oral health care, we're still struggling. Seventy-seven of Michigan's 83 counties have some form of a dental HPSA. Recent data from the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services shows that only 1 in 10 dentists in Michigan accept Medicaid and even fewer do any significant volume of Medicaid.

Alarming, more than one-third of all Michigan seniors have lost six or more natural teeth due to tooth decay or gum disease. Half of children covered by Medicaid or Healthy Kids Dental did not receive dental care services in 2016, and 32 percent of Michigan's residents lacked dental insurance.

Without routine preventive care and immediate restorative care, the oral and overall health of many individuals will continue to worsen and become more expensive to treat. And those are just the hard numbers. What that looks like in reality is heartbreaking.

Esteemed members of the committee, these shortages won't be fixed by sticking with the status quo. They won't be fixed by pretending that more dentists will magically appear in underserved communities. And they certainly won't be fixed by assuming health centers can cover the gap without additional resources. Michigan health centers need more help to provide desperately needed oral health care to more people. That means looking outside the box and using all the tools we have available — including dental therapists as outlined in Senate Bill 541.

I know that over the past two years, everyone here has heard a variety of perspectives on this important issue, many of which have been heated. But I'm here to remind you of the millions of constituents who could benefit from increased access to care. I'm here to remind you that this isn't a turf war between

providers, but rather a critical population health issue. This is an opportunity for dentists and for health centers to augment and expand the services they provide.

We cannot lose sight of the fact that without immediate action, all Michiganders, and especially those living in underserved areas, will continue to go without necessary, quality oral health care services.

Now, there's a lot of bluster and misunderstanding that dentists do not believe that dental therapists will help fix the problem. That is why we're here – Michigan's health centers are the dental providers that want dental therapists. Health centers know that we should be employing all evidence-based models of care to ensure our communities get the access to care they need, including dental therapists.

Michigan health centers are eager to add one more tool to the tool kit to offer more opportunities to receive routine oral health care to their patients and free up dentists for more complicated restorative work. The Michigan Primary Care Association strongly supports Senate Bill 541, its addition of dental therapists in Michigan's Public Health Code, its clarification of the role and scope of dental therapist practice, and its assurances of safety and quality.

Here with me today is Dr. Kevin Steely from Grace Health in Battle Creek to share his firsthand knowledge and experience working with underserved populations in Michigan who consistently struggle with access to oral health care services.

We thank you for this opportunity.